

# Taste and Smell Changes

Category: 2 Symptom

## Changes in your taste and smell

A COVID-19 infection can cause you to lose your taste or smell. Since these two senses work together, many people experience both being affected.

These changes may cause your favourite foods to taste and smell differently following your COVID illness.

Food may taste bland, sweet, or metallic. Although these changes are usually temporary, they can affect your appetite and how much you eat



## Monitoring your progress

Research has suggested that most people see at least some improvements in their taste and smell within 6 months. However, we do not yet know how long it will take for smell and taste to completely recover, and what to expect for those who do not initially improve.

Recovery can be slow and difficult to detect. Also, recovery might be inconsistent and unpredictable. For some people with Long COVID, the loss of taste or smell can be permanent (COVID-19 infection can damage the olfactory nerve that controls your taste and smell). All of this can feel difficult and affect your emotional and mental wellbeing.

To help you monitor the changes in your sense of taste and smell, it might be helpful to use a self-assessment tool about every 6 months. You can create your own or use the one linked on [this webpage](#) to track your progress. For example:

- Can I tell the difference between sugar and salt?
- Can I taste vinegar?
- Does food taste different to the way it should? Are smells that are pleasant to other people unpleasant to me?
- Do I sometimes smell things that other people don't smell?
- Do I detect smells being present but can't make sense of them?

## Smell training

Smell training is daily practice of smelling different scents over several months. The goal is to retrain your nose and brain how to smell.

A few studies have shown that smell training (also known as olfactory training) can help some people recover their sense of smell faster. Taste may also improve with smell training. There is some research evidence showing that taste and smell may improve with smell training in people with Long COVID. There may be some mild side effects (like headache, nausea, or nose irritation), but the Canadian Guideline for Post COVID-19 Condition (CAN-PCC) recommends smell training as it appears to have more benefits than harms. (Click [here](#) to see CAN-PCC recommendation for smell training).

## How smell training works

Smell training works by activating the pathways of the brain responsible for detecting and recognizing smells. By repeatedly focusing on different scents, these neural pathways become stronger and improve your ability to smell over time.

Please note...

If you are pregnant, you may have more smell sensitivity and nausea.

Older people may experience that their sense of smell and taste fade naturally with age. Smell training may not have the same benefits for them as for younger people.

Talk to your healthcare professional to see if smell training is right for you.

## How to make and use smell training kits

You can create your own smell training kit using items you can find at home or in a grocery store. Below are some instructions on how to create and use your own smell training kit from [FifthSense](#) (a UK charity).

### What you need:

- Different items from the home that provide a range of smells – try to select things that you know you found to be pleasant and/or have a connection with.
- Lemon and orange rind, nutmeg, clove, mint, eucalyptus, ground coffee, coconut, and vanilla are all items you can use.
- You can use the raw material (for example, smelling directly from the pepper grinder, ripping a sprig of fresh herbs) or you can use small bowls or jars (ramekins, clean glass spice jars, or baby food jars are ideal).
- You can also purchase smell training kits online that come with a collection of essential oils with different smells.

### Instructions:

1. Place each item into a separate bowl/jar or just take the raw material into your hands.
2. Relax and slowly take short gentle sniffs (sometimes called bunny sniffs) – sniffing too hard, too quickly, and too deeply is likely to result in you not being able to detect anything.
3. Smell for 10 to 20 seconds, focusing on the smell and your memory of the smell. For example, if you are smelling an orange flavour, picture an orange in your mind, and remember the smell of the orange and a time that you ate an orange.
4. Wait a couple of minutes, breathe normally, and move on to the next smell and repeat steps 1 to 4.
5. Record your experience – any changes, what you notice, etc. – using a diary or a template, like this [Smell Ability Diary Log](#) (downloadable link from the [Fifth Sense](#) website).
6. Do this smell training twice daily for several weeks to months.

## Other treatments to improve smell and taste

If there are other conditions that may be contributing to your smell and taste issues, treatment of these may help. Please consult your physician to discuss potential risks and benefits.

For smell, some doctors have prescribed corticosteroid nose inhalers for patients whose loss of smell may be made worse by allergies, runny nose, or blocked sinuses.

If you have acid reflux, treatment with an antihistamine (such as famotidine/Pepcid) or proton pump inhibitor (such as pantoprazole/Pantoloc) may help prevent unusual tastes in your mouth.

Ask your doctor if they think treatment of these conditions may help your smell and/or taste.

## How can you help improve the taste of food?

- Choose foods that you like and continue to retry foods as your taste preferences may change.
- Chew your food more slowly. This can help with digestion and can be calming.
- Keep your mouth and teeth clean and healthy. Brush your teeth and clean your tongue twice a day and rinse with water if it feels dry and uncomfortable. Avoid mouthwashes that have alcohol in them.
- Adding strong flavors such as herbs, spices and sauces can help with taste – for example, mustard, cinnamon, chili, or vinegar.
- Try different flavors, textures (crunchy, seedy, etc.), and temperatures of food to see which you like best.  
\*Do not try this if a speech-language pathologist has checked your ability to swallow and has advised you to only eat soft foods and/or thick liquids. Simple foods (such as plain chicken, fish, tofu, and rice) may be easier to eat, especially if you feel nauseated or have an unsettled stomach. Cold or room temperature foods may be best.
- If smells from cooking bother you, try microwave-ready or cold meals.

## What can you do if food tastes...

### Metallic?

- Although eating enough protein is important for recovery, high protein foods can taste bitter or metallic. Marinating proteins with sweet/sour to change the flavor can help.
- Try a variety of proteins such as eggs, vegetarian meat alternatives, beans, fish, cheese, red meat, or lentils.
- Try plastic cutlery instead of metal and use glass cookware.

### Too sweet?

- Sharp/tart flavors and drinks such as orange, lemon, or lime flavors can be useful in balancing sweet tastes.

### Salty or bitter?

- Salty or bitter taste may be improved by choosing low salt varieties and adding sweet flavors to food or drink, such as honey, sweetener, or sugar.

If you are having difficulty with eating, such as appetite aversion, please discuss this with a healthcare professional.

## Safety issues

Our sense of smell can help us detect hazards, such as spoiled food, smoke, and gas leaks. With Long COVID, you may experience loss of smell but also distortions of smell—some people become over-sensitive to certain smells, including smoke and food.

Depending on your experience of these changes, it may be important to take extra precautions as your smell recovers. You can learn about strategies to stay safe at [this website](#). For example:

- Ensure that you pay attention to 'use-by' dates on food
- Have smoke alarms in your home
- Make sure you get your gas appliances serviced every year

## Be gentle with yourself

Loss of, or changes in, smell or taste can make you feel down. For example, not being able to smell or taste food in the same way can take away the joy of eating. Allow yourself to feel whatever emotions may come, and remember to be gentle with yourself.

You may be more at risk of depression with a reduced or distorted sense of smell or taste, so it is important to check in with a family member or friend on a regular basis. Choose someone you trust so that you can be honest about how you're feeling. Many people also find it helpful to join a peer support group in addition to having a check-in buddy.

If you are finding it difficult to cope, or you are concerned about how long you've been experiencing the loss of taste and smell, please speak to a healthcare professional.

Many people with Long COVID also find peer support programs and groups helpful—to share experiences and find support from other people with similar experiences.

## Where to next?

- Use a smell and taste self-assessment like the one on [this webpage](#) to track your progress.
- Click [here](#) to read the CAN-PCC guideline on smell training.
- Visit the website by [FifthSense](#), a UK charity, and [learn about strategies to stay safe](#)
- Use a diary or template, like [Smell Ability Diary Log](#) (downloadable link from the [Fifth Sense](#) website), to record your experiences and changes.
- Click [here](#) to read an article by Cochrane on olfactory dysfunction after COVID-19 infection.